

**EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA: ROLE OF DR. AMBEDKAR AND E.V. RAMASWAMY NAICKER**

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**Abstract**

India has witnessed a remarkable transformation in the position of women from Vedic period, Medieval Period, Mughal Era, Post-Colonial period till Modern Times. The overbearing social rules and dogmas were codified and enforced on women by upper class society during Mughal Period and later in British regime. This resulted in polygamy, child marriage, illiteracy, discrimination etc. the order of the time. The need for protection of women from atrocious attacks of invaders made patriarchal social structure even more strangulating females. In the wake of Modernism in India, the social reformers such as Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Jyotirba Phule strived hard to bring out a new awakening in the society. They tried to awaken the consciousness of then society and pleaded for equality among the gender. Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar was one of the leaders who documented and institutionalized the codes for equality and human rights for women in Indian. E.V.Ramaswamy Naicker, popularly known as 'Periyar', was a great social reformer and a leader in South India. In 1928-29, he initiated a rationalist movement called 'Self-Respect Movement in India'. He challenged Brahmanism through Self-Respect Movement in 1928, which was considered a major discourse in Dravidian society. He formulated a coherent concept of gender, whereby the women were provided with space to redefine, accommodate and advance their concerns from democratic perspective. The present paper aims at exploring contributions of social reformers for the betterment of women in India.

**Paper**

Women, all over the world are subjected to inequality in terms of rights and privileges. They need to constantly face the bigotry and chauvinism. The uneven and victimizing social condition have suppressed them for ages. The individuality of a woman, her sense of identity and rights are not taken into consideration by male-dominated society where they are restricted within the four walls of the house. The roots of such subjugation and coercion could be traced deep into human civilization. The manipulative machinery of patriarchy plotted against the half of its population, in order to maintain their own supremacy. Biologically, woman is weak and vulnerable hence she has to depend on her husband and the other male members of her family during the period of her child-birth and menstruation. This physical incapacity of a woman is exploited by the dominant class of the society to maintain supremacy. In India, the religious, social, as well as political machinery of the society work together in order to shape the foundation and render solidity to the society. If we study the process of socialization, we come to know that in human history religious, social as well as

political machineries have conspired against women by imposing coercive norms of patriarchy and eventually fulfilled their private ends. For ages, this patriarchal hegemony compelled a woman to think and act in the conformation to the ideals of phallocentric society. In such society, gender prescribed roles for women are found altogether different from men. Women in Indian society were forced to act in the prescribed manner within the allotted space. Due to many demographic and socio-political conditions, the condition of Indian women in the last century was extremely pathetic. They faced discrimination in the society and complete violation of women's right.

The history of Indian Woman is a long story of transition of her position from dignity and glory to her enslavement. In the earlier civilization, which was matriarchal in nature, patriarchal gradually took the form of exploitation and coercion of the women. Basically, women are considered weaker vessels, owing to their physical vulnerability. During menstruation, pregnancy and child birth, they had to depend on men. Due to their weaknesses, women were subsequently enslaved in patriarchal social construct allowing men to rule over them as father, husband and the head of the family. In India, the Vedic period was considered as the golden period in the history of Indian women, extending respectful position to them in many ways. Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar was one of the prominent figures in Indian socio-political scenario who contributed significantly in uplifting the status of women in Post-colonial India. Throughout his life, he has actively participated in the social activities and movements against the discrimination and exploitation of marginalized people including women. As 'The Chairman of Constitution Drafting Committee and First Law Minister of Independent India', he drafted several codes to ensure equality on the grounds of religion, caste, race and sex. Hindu Code Bill, which was passed in 25<sup>th</sup> Sep, 1951, gave a new lease of life to women in Indian subcontinent.

There were number of unnatural laws enforced against women that were duly sanctioned by discriminatory religious norms enforced by upper-class Hindus. The saints like Guru Nanak, Kabir, Ravidas and the social reformers like Swami Vivekananda, Maharshri Dayananda Saraswati, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Periyar E.V. Ramaswami, Mahatama Jyotiba phuley raised their forceful voices in favour of women. They struggled to give them equal status and opportunities with man. Ever British in India, in many ways tried to assuage the women's sufferings, they formulated strict rules to ban Sati System on the insistence of Raja Ram Mohan Roy. Matama Jyotirba Phule and his wife revered Mata Savitribhai Phule opened 18 schools for girls in Pune starting from ever first school for girls on 1-1-1848, and adopted son born to a Brahmin widow as their heir against strict opposition from Hindu religious priests.

It was Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, who came as a true emancipator of Indian women. He fought for the cause of oppressed, depressed, exploited, illiterates, ill fed and ill-treated men and women irrespective of their caste or social status, place of birth, affiliations and without caring for his personal discomforts. He strongly believed that it was as necessary for women as for men for overall development of individual and the nation. On March 19 and 20, 1927, he addressed a huge meeting of depressed classes, including women, and gave strong

call for liberation of women. While addressing, the conference of Depressed Classes of Women on 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> July 1942, he said, “He measured the progress of a community by the degree of progress made by the women of that community. He advised, let every girl who marries, stand by her husband, claim to be her husband’s friend and equal and refuse to be his slave. He advocated avoiding early marriage and producing too many children. Give proper education to your children, so that they live a dignified life” (Naik, 2003) He advocated equal wages for equal work irrespective of sex and caste and advocated maternity leave for working mothers. In Bombay Legislative Council in 1928 he said “---- it is in the interest of the Nation that the mother ought to get a certain amount of rest during the pre-natal period and also subsequently” (Rajak, 2022)

As the Chairman of Constitution Drafting Committee and the First Law Minister of Independent Indian, he gave a strong constitution to Independent India. He codified stringent acts to eradicate the discrimination on the basis of caste, religion, sex, creed, place of birth under the Statute Book. Following are some laws that tried to ensure equality in India

The Indian Constitution provides for Equality before Law( Art.14 ), the State shall not discriminate any citizen on the grounds of , religion, caste, race, sex , place of birth or any of them ( Art 15 ), equal opportunities to all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment under the State ( Art16 ), equal pay to all for equal work for both men & women( Art.39d ) right to work , to education and public assistance in certain cases ( Art 41 ), Provision of just and human conditions of work and maternity relief (Art 42) , Provision of uniform Civil Code to all the citizens throughout the Indian Territory (Art 44) (as cited in Dr. Ambedkar and Women Empowerment, p.01)

In October 1948, Dr Ambedkar submitted a modified and revised Hindu Code bill to Constitution assembly, which was under consideration since 194. This bill faced a lot of opposition from powerful political leaders and then votaries of Indian culture. Finally, the four clauses of the Bill were adopted by the House on 25 Sept, 1951. This eventually strengthened the position of the women in the society. The four clauses passed were incorporated in the Hindu Code Bill, these were

1. The Hindu marriage Act,1955
2. The Hindu succession Act,1956
3. The Hindu Minority and guardianship Act1956
4. The adoption and maintenance Act 1956

Although Dr Ambedkar could not succeed in getting the full Hindu Code Bill passed, his efforts did not go waste and he laid the foundation of equality for the women of India in all spheres of life. Women can now have custody of child, no marriage before age of 18 years, provision of alimony (maintenance allowance from husband on getting legally separation), widow can now adopt a child, rights over parental property, a uniform scheme for succession to the property of a Hindu female who dies intestate (not having made a will), Mother can change guardian of minor by will, and many more rights due to the relentless efforts of Dr Ambedkar. Due to Dr. Ambedkar efforts the Indian women are now holding high positions of authority in all fields including, Engineering, Medical, Education including Higher

Education; Army, Air Force, Aviation, Navy, Police, Administration, Politics, Foreign Services, Industry and Trade.

E.V.Ramaswamy Naicker, popularly known as 'Periyar', was a great social reformer and a leader in South India. In 1928-29, he initiated a rationalist movement called 'Self-Respect Movement in India'. In his paper, 'Kudu Arasu', he deconstructed feminine myth the help of well-known Dravidian legend of 'Kannagi, Illango and Madhavi'. Periyar was an anti-caste radical thinker and the reformer claimed that the degradation of Indian society is based on 'Chaturvarna' and the rise of the Brahmanical class. He felt that the Brahmanical class used their access to education and traditional knowledge as a weapon to oppress the lower class. He challenged Brahmanism through Self-Respect Movement in 1928, which was considered a major discourse in Dravidian society. He formulated a coherent concept of gender, whereby the women were provided with space to redefine, accommodate and advance their concerns from egalitarian perspective. It opened the world of knowledge for women, increased their mobility and visibility in public and private spheres. Through his writings, he openly refuted the myth of chastity which has been woven around female sexuality.

He strongly advocated some reformation bills concerning age old marriage practices in India. The Age of Consent Bill and the Child Marriage Abolition Act are some of his major contributions. He opposed the devadasi system as a form of exploitation that dedicated women for 'the pleasure of the Gods' (ultimately for the pleasure of priestly class). He opposed the notion that the sole purpose of a woman's life is reproduction, on the ground that by this way the woman became just an instrument in the maintenance and the propagation of patriarchy. He advocated divorce as a way out of an unhappy marriage. A woman's claim for equal rights to property and her right to practice birth control were advocated by him. He strongly opposed the idea that 'work is the mark of a man' on the ground that the woman's contribution to household work goes without notice and remains unrewarded. He advocated the option of divorce as a way out of an unhappy marriage. He writes in his article Anaimuthu:

If the right to divorce is not granted, polygamy and polyandry should become norms. To bear in silence and patience the travails of an unhappy marriage is a slur on one's humanity, self-respect and clear folly. (as cited in Kelkar, Meena, Gangavane, Deepti p. 232)

Thus, Periyar's fought for the reconstruction of feminine both in the private and public spheres of the society. Self-respect Movement, initiated by this visionary is considered as one of the path breaking events in the Indian history of feminism. He dealt with the women questions in thirties and forties that are still relevant in India and most of the progressive nations of the world.

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